

Chicago, IL - U.S. Reps. Mark Kirk and Judy Biggert held a congressional hearing Monday on the growing dangers of social networking websites. They heard testimony from local law enforcement and school officials on action they are taking to protect children from Internet predators.

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, over 50,000 sexual predators are online at any one time. Over 85 million people are registered on MySpace.com, including millions of American children. Local and national media have done several investigative reports exposing safety concerns related to social networking websites and how easy it is for a pedophile to contact a child online.

“While MySpace.com and other social networking sites were created to allow teenagers and young adults a chance to socialize with friends, these sites are also very popular with pedophiles,” said Kirk. “Recent Chicago area arrests make it clear that action is needed at the federal, state and local levels to protect our children from Internet predators.”

“One in five young people have been approached online with unwanted sexual advances. Naperville has witnessed two high-profile cases in the past two months alone,” Biggert said.

Testifying about action local law enforcement is taking to clamp down on Internet predators

were **Patricia Fix**, Lake County State's Attorney, Cyber Crimes Unit, Rich **Wistocki**, Naperville Police Department, and **Sgt. Rick White**, Lake County Sheriff's Department.

State's Attorney Fix gave disturbing details of two cases her office prosecuted involving a 40-year-old male and 14-year-old female who met in a Yahoo chat room and two teachers who are being prosecuted for Aggravated Criminal Sexual Abuse of two students, ages 15 and 16. The teachers met the students online using instant messaging and e-mail services provided by the school's web network.

Rich Wistocki is very familiar with MySpace.com. As a member of the Naperville Police Department, he arrested two males within a month that used MySpace.com to solicit sex with underage females. Within the past year, Wistocki has had close to 25 cases involving MySpace.com either directly on his case load, or working with the Attorney General's office. "Predators are online when the kids are online; late at night when parents are sleeping, Saturdays, Sundays and school holidays. It is my mission to teach parents as well as law enforcement officers to be better parents and well rounded officers in this ever changing technological world," said Wistocki.

Sgt. Rick White of the Lake County Sheriff Cyber Crime Unit admitted both of his daughters have MySpace accounts recognizing the Internet is a great way for people to communicate, but urged parents to set strict rules for its use. "I have their passwords. I am with them when they are online. They know what to post and what not to post on the Internet," said White. However, White went on to say the number of bad guys on the Internet far outweighs the number of us trying to stop and capture them and urged better coordination between the federal, state and local law enforcement in handling cyber crime.

Kirk and Biggert's hearing also considered H.R. 5319, the Deleting Online Predators Act, legislation currently pending in Congress that limits the ability of pedophiles to reach children who use online social networking sites in public schools and libraries. Kirk and Biggert are co-sponsors of this legislation.

"Parents are faced with the important task of closely monitoring their children's online activities, but they cannot watch their children 24 hours a day," said Kirk. "They need to be assured that their government and educational institutions are protecting their kids as well. And that's why I strongly support this important and timely legislation."

While this legislation is pending in Congress, several schools are instituting strict regulations on the use of social networking sites and some have banned the use of them altogether.

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Venetia Miles, Director of Community Relations and Assistant to the Superintendent of Illinois District 214 schools testified that students are barred from accessing social networking websites on school computers. When a student attempts to log in to MySpace.com, a warning alarm is sounded and the computer alerts the student that they are prohibited from accessing the site.

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District 214 is the second largest school district in Illinois and includes Wheeling, Prospect, Buffalo Grove, Elk Grove, Rolling Meadows and John Hersey High Schools. They are one of the first school districts to ban access to social networking sites.

Libertyville School District 128 made national news this year when they revised their Athletic Code of Conduct to address social networking sites and instituted a Student Technology Acceptable Use Policy that all students must sign ensuring that everything they access on the web using school technology is for educational purposes. **Prentiss G. Lea**, Associate Superintendent for District 128, testified that the Athletic Code of Conduct goes beyond school property and was amended to include that any athlete maintaining or identified on a blog site which depicts illegal or inappropriate behavior will be considered to be in violation of this code.

“Our suburban schools are recognizing the advance of web-based technology and are adapting to it. They see these social networking sites as an educational tool, but also recognize the dangers these sites can pose. I applaud District 214 and District 128’s aggressive action to regulate student use of these sites. Schools and libraries across the country should follow their lead,” said Kirk.

Kirk and Biggert will use testimony from Monday’s hearing to push for congressional action in passing the Deleting Online Predator’s Act. With statistics showing one in five children being approached over the Internet by pedophiles and only one in four of these children telling their parents about it, Congress must work with law enforcement and schools to help parents protect their children.

“As children, many of us were taught never to talk to strangers. As parents and grandparents, our message must change with technology to include strangers on the Internet,” said Biggert.

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